Hughes with Barthes: Mytho-poetic Icons

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There seems to be a logical contradiction between Ted Hughes' early definition of his poetry as "verses of simple observation" (Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes* 243), and his standing out in contemporary British poetry as the myth-making poet par excellence. Paradoxically, his poetry is celebrated at once as being extraordinarily referential and remarkably mytho-poetic. Never has this been underlined as being at all surprising. Yet it may be considered puzzling that the much admired author of *Crow*, *Cave Birds*, *Gaudete*, should provide such advice to pupil - poets as, for instance, "The descriptions will be detailed, scientific in their objectivity and microscopic attentiveness" (*Poetry in the Making* 64). To would-be novelist he says: "[So] every page in your novel will be a new exercise in observation, till pretty soon, we hope, something approaching photographic observation begins to come naturally to you" (*Poetry in the Making* 90). It raises no small paradox to show, after Keith Sagar and many others, the opening in Hughes' poetry of a mythical space, a sacred space, as if outside history, where such fallen angels as Gog or Crow do tread. The logical contradiction to be understood, and if possible solved, is that of the apparent absence of any gap between a strict horacian, ut-pictura-poesis doctrine and mytho-poetry, between "scientific objectivity" and myth-making. A solution to this apparent crux is provided by another seemingly far-fetched rapprochement between the British poet laureate and the structuralist French critic Roland Barthes, who both wrote their major works in a period going from the structuralist hayday of the late 1950s to the late 1970s, and both - Hughes in Cambridge and Barthes in Paris - had a very strong interest in language and myth, although from seemingly diverging, and possibly radically opposed points of views.

Before diving into the theory, later to re-emerge into a hopefully better - understood surface of pratice, the logical contradiction at stake needs to be shown again and made as graphic as possible. Here are a few examples. A poem like "Dawn's Rose" (*Crow* 59) may indeed give its reader the impression, no doubt imaginary, of perfectly rendering, of evoking with extreme exactitude, the feeling generated by the crow's cry. However, what is at stake in *Crow, The Life and Songs of the Crow* is not so much the real crow as an imaginary beast, a mythical being. And yet it is a real crow, very precisely. And this very unscientific vagueness brings us to the heart of the matter indeed. Here is another simple example. About his poem "The Thought-Fox" (*The Hawk in the Rain* 15), Hughes said "It is a real fox, and as I read the poem I see it move, I see it setting its prints, I see its shadow going over the irregular surface of the snow. . . . It is very real to me" (*Poetry in the Making* 20). Yet no serious reader in his/her right mind will ever assert that the text is a truthful representation of a fox in a "photographic" way. And those of Hughes' poems which have been published with illustrations, as in *Flowers and Insects* or *River* show in a very obvious and dramatic way the radical and irreducible difference there is between the pictorial and the verbal treatment of the same referent. Finally, the whole mimologism of Hughes', namely the way he wishfully wants to think that words imitate things, seems to go against the grain of mytho-poetry. No referent whatsoever can indeed be directly imitated by the sounds of the words of a poem with a mythical or imaginary subject matter. (Words can easily be understood to imitate, say, the song of a bird, but how do they imitate a spirit ?) Hughes' poems depict the real in the way symphonic music can effectively represent a landscape, or the sound of a bassoon in an orchestra, an earthworm in Noah's Arch. A decoder is needed, nolens volens.

Now this self-same logical contradiction was formulated by Roland Barthes in 1957, and so only ten years before Hughes *Poetry in the Making* theorizing. And Barthes made this contradiction a central characterisitic of what was for him contemporary poetry. Whatever reservations should perhaps be made concerning the relevance of this consideration to poetry in general, it will prove very suitable to Hughes' poetic practice. Barthes says:

Contemporary poetry is a regressive semiological system. Whereas myth aims at an ultra-signification, at the amplification of a first system, poetry on the contrary attempts to regain an infra-signification, a pre-semiological state of language ; in short, it tries to transform the sign back into meaning: its ideal, ultimately, would be to reach not the meaning of words, but the meaning of things themselves (Barthes 133).

It has been established that the ideal to which Hughes' poetry tends seems indeed to be, in many respects, to reach the meaning of things themselves. Regressive, no doubt, is the "pre-semiological system of infra-signification" of which *Orghast*, the wordless, primitive drama he fathered with Peter Brook, is the nadir. But even though this definition of poetry coincides very closely with that of Hughes, it defines poetry as the radical contrary of myth: "Poetry occupies a position which is the reverse of that of myth" (Barthes 134). Now, this is based on the definition which Barthes has given of the signifying structure of myth - "myth aims at an ultra-signification, at the amplification of a primary system". Says Barthes:

[But] myth is a peculiar system in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before him: *it is a second-order semiological system*. . . . Everything happens as if myth was shifting the formal system of the first significations sideways (Barthes 114-5).

Now this is precisely where there can be found a possible answer to the contradiction which seems to rise from the conflict between referential poetry and mytho-poetry. For it is possible to say that Hughes' poetry, to speak plainly, plays a double game. On a first level, some of his poems are referential, mimological and pre-semiological to variously perceptible degrees. On a second level such texts could have a more or less asserted mytho-poetic dimension. Barthes foresaw the possibility of something like that, when he wrote about "modern poetry" that "by fiercely refusing myth, poetry surrenders to it bound hand and foot" (Barthes 134). Now this is far from applying to Hughes' poetry since, far from refusing myth, everyone agrees that Hughes makes deliberate use of it in a conscious attempt to write mythic poetry. Moreover, it is impossible not to think that, in an increasing way as his work progresses, Hughes' constant preoccupation is to strive towards controlling the mythic quality of his poems. But there is nothing surprising there, since philosophers are always at best breathing down the necks of poets, and Barthes would very probably not have chosen Hughes' as an example of what he understood by "modern poetry".

Yet, Barthes does perceive this relationship between analogy and mythology, between infra- and ultra-signification, which is such a strong characteristic of Hughes' poetic writing. He even goes further, when he notices that not only is there a possibility for these two modes of signification to coexist, but that there can also be some sort of symbiosis, a relationship of vital interdependence between the mythical form, and the analogically motivated form. He writes: "Motivation is necessary to the very duplicity of myth: myth plays on the analogy between meaning and form: there is no myth without motivated form" (Barthes 126).

Now, there is an imperceptible shift from the pedestrian animal poet to the prophesying shaman, from the innocuous author of pretty evocations of the earth to the transcendent seer.

Mytho-poetry needs, the more strongly to soar, the advantageous roost of mimological, motivated language. The belief in myth is all the stronger when it can be grafted on more obvious facts. Analogy then permits a sort of poetic "double-bind" - this is not truth, but it is a truth even more true than the truth. The Japanese scholar Naoki Okubo understood that, when he wrote that "In short, Hughes transfers realism into symbolism, which he achieves by amplifying objects without losing their realistic feel" (Okubo 240).

Mytho-poetry, with Hughes, founds itself on a primary effort towards referentiality. In other words, myth, when myth there is, does not present itself as such, but appears as a natural continuation of reference. No token warns the reader, as in primitive songs, of the shift to a narrative of another order. And this is not so much the effect of some sort of perverseness of the poet's, as the product of a mode of thinking akin to belief. For Hughes, there is no gap between the signifier and the referent. For him, in fact, the concept of signifier does not make any sense. From the real to language, there is no gap - no gap either from language to myth - no gap, therefore, from the real to myth. Hughes aims at making myth grow on the compound of hypotyposis, defined broadly as any use of language consisting in eschewing Ferdinand de Saussure's axiom of the arbitrariness of linguistic signs. And here is how Barthes defined this semiology of amalgamation, most of all in the field of the pictorial arts and of the novel, rather than in that of poetry:

. . . the very defect of the signified to the benefit of the referent alone becomes the very signifier of realism: there occurs an "effet de réel", the foundation of this unavowed verisimilitude which forms the æsthetics of all the current works of modernity.

It is easy to spot these ephemeral instants by the dozen, when, in the poems, a few words unmistakably come to bind the subject to reality, as if to say "and that is true", "I've been there", to convince the reader, then confirm him in his conviction that he is reading the real thing. Here are a few samples: "on the cream paint of our kitchen wall" (*The Hawk in the Rain* 39) . . . "Two, six pounds each, over two feet long," (*Lupercal* 56) . . . "And I saw, down in the dark valley, / Halifax . . . " (*Wodwo* 166) . . . "Wrapped in the carpet, the wallpaper, tied with the lampflex" (*Crow* 48), etc.. But on the contrary of what happens in the novel, where the "effet de réel" is to be found in the apparently superfluous detail, Hughes' poems sometimes seem to be made of nothing else. Indivisible self-contained units, fugitive transitions towards the next poem or, as the eyes of the wolf in "Wolfwatching", "Like doorframes in a desert / Between nothing and nothing" (*Wolfwatching* 15). These texts are like absolute details which seem to lack nothing to evoke the thing, or the spirit of the thing they mean at one go.

Barthes's definition of myth first permits to define and understand, to read in depth, a particular type of short, descriptive, autonomous poem, which seems to be one of the sure signs of Hughes' signature throughout his work. Even the longer texts are somehow made up of shorter, mostly self-contained units which he then divides from the others rather freely in selections. These unitary poems can often be analysed as so many smaller myths, in the terms of the barthesean definition.

Here is one example - a poor example, as we shall see, because this early myth does not work well. "The Martyrdom of Bishop Farrar" (*The Hawk in the Rain* 61-2) is a short text, using for its referential basis a historical fact, which would be merely the story of a Christian martyr among others, were he not a distant relative of the poet. The martyrdom of this bishop however takes the form of an ordeal, in so far as his silence is said to prove the truth of his

doctrine. Even more than as a myth, that poem first works as a tale with a moral, which explains with an example the nature and principle of martyrdom. That is the first level of understanding. The second, ultra-significant, mythical level of the text becomes visible if one realizes that, when reading this poem, there is a feeling of uneasiness, which comes from a sense that the poem is inferring something else than what it says. Indeed, there is something surprising to reading an apology of Christian martyrdom from Hughes' pen, and what is more, the defence of a protestant against Mary the Catholic. The reason for the uneasiness becomes clearer when this little poem (which taken literally could very well be Hughes' only Christian poem) is read over again in the light of much later parts of Hughes' work, and especially, for example, the poems of the "Epilogue" of *Gaudete*. "The Martyrdom of Bishop Farrar" is, more or less consciously, felt to be a hijacking of the Christian message of the Word made flesh, by presenting a particular martyrdom which precisely evacuates words, and prefers to the Word, the violently assaulted flesh of the body. "Myth hides nothing and flaunts nothing: it distorts ; myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflexion", says Barthes (129), and one of the points in this poems where such an inflexion perhaps betrays itself is the unmistakable comparison, in the fifth stanza, of the flames of Hell with the Pentecostal tongues of fire of the Holy Spirit:

But the fire that struck here, come from Hell even,
Kindled little heavens in his words
As he fed his body to the flame alive.
Words which, before they will be dumbly spared,
Will burn their body and be tongued with fire
Make paltry folly of flesh and this world's air.

And all imaginable denials fail to erase the unmentioned and unmentionable presence of this "sort of constantly moving turnstile which presents alternately the meaning of the signifier and its form" (Barthes 123) . Behind Mary's flames, here sanctified, there appears as in filigree the at once murderous and blessing fangs of the Goddess. And it is very difficult to hush the dual voice which contradictorily interprets the last line of the poem - "And smoke burned his sermons into the skies" - at once as the hosanna of a successful holocaust and a note of incredulous derisiveness.

Although it must necessarily remain unconvincing, that example shows how mytho-poetry is a matter of tight-rope walking. But that is a poor example, because the myth here is too strong and, using a subject too heavily laden with emotion, its blinding operation is rather too efficient, so much so that for most readers that poem probably does not work as a myth, but merely as a very short story in verse. Its interpretation relies far too heavily on a knowledge of the complete work for the poem as a myth to work alone. That is because "The Martyrdom of Bishop Farrar", as it is the case very often with Hughes' poems, is a fore-running text developped later and elsewhere. (In this case, the burning of the church in *Gaudete* may be one of the more mature re-writings).

As a mytho-poem, "The Martyrdom of Bishop Farrar" does not work, or works poorly, because it is too obscure and complex. Its latent content is too far away from a possible or likely conscious phrasing. And myth has nothing to do with obscurity. On the contrary, it thrives in the dazzling glare of full daylight. "All the ambiguity of myth is there: its clarity is euphoric" (Barthes 143). By nature, myth works immediately. There is no obscure or complicated myth.

To illustrate how that happens in Hughes' poems, one should quote one of his most beautiful mythical poems, "Skylarks" (*Wodwo* 168-171). The poet speaks from the point of view of an immediate spectator of the real lark, thus creating from the start a strong "effet de réel", which is reinforced by the fact that the poem is inscribed in a diegesis: it pretends to describe the flight and song of the lark. At the first line it soars: "The lark begins to go up". In the last part it lands: "To land on a wall-top, crest up," (171). But apart from these two points, the order of the sequence perhaps doesn't matter so much. In *Selected Poems 1957 - 1981* the poem has eight sections instead of six, and the added parts come fourth and eighth. So the number and sequential order of the parts matter less than their plurality, the story told matters less than the iteration which characterizes the approach of the subject. What counts most in this poem is the way a narrator and therefore a reader is brought into contact with an object, repetitively, with a brevity which contributes to creating a most efficient hypotyposis or impression of contact with the real thing. Critics have poured ceaseless commentaries explaining how the poem mimics the flight of the lark. (Here are the Bassoon and the Earthworm again). With the same brief dash of the pen, this motivated sign ("The lark") serves as a signifier for ecstasy ("Conscience perfect"). And that crystallizes into one verse, lying at the semiotic centre of the poem, which is all at once the point where the signifier pretends, by its quotation marks, to become one with the referent and where the words chosen for the onomatopoeia make the lark cry: "Joy ! Help ! Joy ! Help !". This line alone bears the two storeys of the mythical rocket. Then, on second reading, each section of the poem will appear to articulate these two simultaneous movements, more or less densely, more or less efficiently. The myth says: (1) here is a lark - *the* real lark *ipse* - well, (2) it is a mystic, it is a seer, whose perception reaches beyond our limited human sight.

It is particularly unperceptive to criticise and assess the poem - or any poem, for all that - from a zoologist's point of view, discussing whether real larks are indeed like that or not. The larks' flight is an unexplicit metaphor of the shamanic flight, of the mystic journey to the world of spirits and back. And the verisimilitude of its presentation in the poem serves as evidence to verify the real existence of this other world. Whether the reader believes that story or not, is not the question. That is simply a matter of fact. "The reader lives the myth as a story at once true and unreal" (Barthes 128). Well, this is the typical occupation of the reader of any work of art, unless mad. Yet the myth inflects it's reader's vision of the world, waylays the perception of at least one detail of reality, orientates the vision of things, and this all the more strongly because the "effet de réel" is stronger.

Clearly, with Hughes, there is a large number of poems comparable to "Skylarks", which build a myth on a hypotyposis, most often a visual one, nearly photographical. That is a characteristic way of his. It would be convenient to call such poems *ICONS*, in the acception of the 19th-century American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce who defined the term. For Peirce an *icon* is a sign, the signifier and signified of which are in a natural relationship of ressemblance or evocation. The more widespread sense of the word *icon* is no hinderance, since for Hughes the subjects of most of these poems have an imaginary and sometimes a religious dimension. Is not the title of the icon of the mayflies in *Flowers and Insects* "Saint's Island" (26-31) ? In "Gnat-Psalm" (*Wodwo* 179-181)the gnats are called *Hassidim* ("O little Hasids") and in that poem as well as in "Skylarks" the subject of the icon is the object of prayers.

Of these icons of which "Skylarks" is the type, and which may be defined as presenting animal seers - or animal mystagogues - there is a more ancient version, earlier and therefore no doubt more opaque. That is "An Otter" (*Lupercal* 46-7) which presents a denizen of both

worlds. To this dual nature, this capacity to inhabit the real, is added the quality of the incorporal. This hypostatic manifestation of an animal spirit is found again in "Strawberry Hill" (16), which is also a myth of their immortality. "Coming down through Somerset" (*Moortown* 48-9) may be read as a ico of poetic immortality. It is not necessary to multiply the examples. It may be enough to point out that *Season Songs* presents icons of the Eternal Return, that *River* draws icons of the earth as a maternal body. In *Crow*, however, things grow more complex, and fewer of those poems are merely icons than the referent - dominated texts. "A Disaster" ; (33), for example, may be read as an icon of the Word, and even gives a concise image of the time of its reigns, while placing Crow outside this time of the Word.

Yet, obviously, this notion of icon is far from accounting for the whole of Hughes' mythical poetry. It is merely a tool to illustrate the basic mechanics of mytho-poetry, some rudimentary technical cogs and wheels under the beautiful bonnet. It is also remarkable, though, that these mytho-poems work rather like dreams, with a latent and a manifest content composed of images from everyday waking life which, once reprocessed, serve as vehicles to embody a latent tenor. These icons of Hughes' are ways of giving poetic, literary shape to otherwise incommunicable subconscious ideas, forces and structures which would otherwise remain silent, purloined letters. In the poem "February" (*Lupercal* 13), Hughes self-reflexively alludes to that poetic practice as a deliberate process. The making of mytho-poetic icons is evoked through the image of wolf-masks:

. . . These feet, deprived,
Disdained all that are caged, or storied, or pictured,
Through and throughout the true world search
For their vanished head, for the world

Vanished with the head, the teeth, the quick eye - .
Now, lest they choose his head,
Under severe moons he sits making
Wolf-masks, mouths clamped well onto the world.

Mytho-poetry is a practice of conceptualization. In his work on Ted Hughes, Nicholas Bishop quotes the text of a letter from Hughes, in which he explains a theory rather in keeping with this vision of things:

I have a theory that for most poems there are two basic versions - the version which 'interprets' the impulse, using all the machinery of the conscious mind, and another, quite different version, which is attracted towards the first version from the unconscious mind . . . the conscious mind gets busy from its side and the unconscious from its side, separately.

Ideally, (Z) the two should work as one. In practice - you usually get (A) the conscious efforts which have a dim awareness but a certain disregard for what the unconscious is offering, (B) the unconscious effort (very rare) which often seems irrelevant, (C) after a gruesome struggle of redrafting, the battletorn fragments of (A) carrying scraps and rags and bits lost from (B) . . . (26 April 1987) (Bishop 75).

There is once again the ideal "(Z)" of a poem composed with two levels, the one "conscious", the other "unconscious", the former serving as a vehicle ("carrying") for the other. That is another way of mentioning a phenomenon identical to the one explained here, where one level

of meaning "(B)" whose signification is problematic comes to tap the signifying system of a primary one, "(A)". That second level, which is the level of myth for Barthes, in a way comes to parasite the first ("is attracted towards the first"), to become its symbiotic partner ("the two should work as one"). "The Thought-Fox" (*The Hawk in the Rain* 15) is probably the poem which offers the most clearly a metaphor for this meeting of two previously foreign levels of signification. The work of description which the poet provides finally catches, as if accidentally, something which he recognizes as a fox and which manifests itself by a vision of encompassing - "an eye, / A widening deepening greenness". That this alliance should never be utterly completed, that is to say, like Mr Ramsay in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, that it should never be possible to reach letter "(Z)", is no new thing in art. "At the end of the ritual / up comes a goblin" is the memorable sentence by which Hughes' *Cave Birds* (62)expressedthis ultimate failure of myths to immobilize the world.

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